

Early Islamic Monuments at Ajdabiyah

ABDULHAMID ABDUSSAID

PART I: THE FORTRESS - PALACE

The importance of Ajdabiyah (Agedabia) at successive periods of history has been ensured by the availability of good and abundant water at the junction of the Syrtic coastal route and the caravan track leading inland to the case of Gialo. In Roman times, if not earlier, a military garrison was stationed there to protect the wells and control the caravans; and there is reason to believe that this was the road-station *Corniclanum* that appears on the Peutinger Map (1). Inscriptions cut into the rock-surface near the wells attest the presence of Roman soldiers of Syrian origin (2).

It was, however, after the Arab invasion of North Africa that Ajdabiyah reached the peak of its prosperity and gained its present name; this early Islamic development of the site was probably mainly due to the interest of the Fatimid dynasty in protecting the overland route between the Maghreb and Egypt. El-Bekri, writing in the middle of the 11th century, describes Ajdabiyah as "a great city situated in a desert of hard stone, and possessing several rock-cut wells yielding good water. There is also a sweet-water spring. . . This city contains a Mosque of beautiful architecture founded by Abu el-Kasem, son of Obeid-Allah (Fatimid Khalif, E. H. 322-344 = A.D. 934-946), the octagonal minaret of which is of admirable construction. It also contains baths, caravanserais and much-frequented bazaars. . . This town has a sea-port named El-Mahour, which is 18 miles distant; and it also contains three castles" (3).

Following the invasion of the Beni Hilal, Ajdabiyah seems to have declined, for Edrisi—writing a century after el-Bekri—states that "in former times it was surrounded with walls, but there remain only two forts in the desert" (4). Subsequently sedentary life on the site came completely to an end, the wells being frequented only by nomads and travellers until—in the closing years of the 19th century—the Turks established a Mudiriyah and encouraged the construction of houses and shops. This new settlement flourished—inevitably at the expense of the ancient ruins—until the early years of the Italian occupation, when it was razed to the ground by General Latini's forces in 1914. In the years 1920-22 Ajdabiyah had a brief revival as the seat of the independent Senussi Amirate established by the Treaty of er-Regima. It was re-occupied by the Italians in 1924, and thereafter became a military outpost and road-centre,

(1) Goodchild, *Tabula Imperii Romani-Cyrene*. (Oxford 1954). The siting of *Corniclanum* is confirmed by the secure identification of *Boreum* at Bu Grada, near Marsa Brega (cf. *JRS*, XLI [1951], 11)

(2) S. Ferri, *Rivista della Tripolitania*, II (1925-6), 362-386.

(3) *El-Bekri*, ed. De Slane (Alger 1913), 16-17.

(4) *Edrisi*, ed. Dozy and De Goeje (Leiden 1866), 157.

the new town developing on the plain a little distant from the Turkish settlement the site of which is now marked by the principal Moslem cemetery. In consequence of recent oilfield development in the Syrtic region, Ajdabiyah is now expanding rapidly (5).

The remains of the early Islamic city were more prominent in the last century than they are to-day, and were noticed by several European travellers. In 1812 Agostino Cervelli found buildings still standing, and made rough sketches of the most elaborate monument, which now know to be the Mosque constructed by Abu el-Kasem (6). In 1824, Jean-Raymond Pacho made excellent drawings of "the remains of two castles," one of which is the same Mosque seen by Cervelli, and the other the Fortress-Palace with which we are here concerned (7). James Hamilton, visiting Ajdabiyah in 1852, described the visible ruins as consisting of "groups of buildings situated on two low hills, about a quarter of a mile apart. The centre of the intervening space is a flat bare rock, in which several wells are pierced." He described briefly but accurately the same two monuments which Pacho had drawn, defining the Fortress-Palace as "a castle of excellent character, which cannot be later than the third century of the Hejira. It is a rectangular structure terminating in three chambers, the extremity of the centre one of which has an octagonal niche, on which the plaster still remains. This end is flanked by round dome-covered towers, whose sides are perforated with loopholes for arrows; but neither within nor without, neither above nor below, could I discover ornament or inscriptions" (8).

Gerhard Rohlfs, in 1869, found the Fortress still in good condition, but gives no additional details regarding it (9). The last traveller to see the monument still in its original fortified form was G. A. Freund (10) (1881) who wrote: "The principal ruins are situated on a low hill and consist of three rectangular and parallel rooms, with walls constructed of large limestone blocks, well cut and cemented. The two external rooms were, as also the inner one, covered with vaults. The former spring from the outer rectangular wall, whilst the latter—the middle one—displays an octagonal apse. This is covered by a half-dome built up against the long vault of the central room. The outer wall continues beyond these three rooms until it meets two circular rooms, with domes limiting the construction. The dome of the tower to the left survives, whilst the right-hand one is destroyed. It appears that in correspondence with the axis of the central chamber a broad stairway leads to the hill, below the building itself."

Freund also noted that "these remains are now serving the inhabitants as a quarry for limestone blocks and thus, before long, even the last vestiges of this ancient and great city will disappear." This prediction was to prove only partially correct, for by the time of the Italian occupation of Libya the central vaulted chamber was still standing prominently, although the outline of the Fortress and its corner towers was no longer visible. The vaulted construction was soon enclosed within the outer walls of a large polygonal "Ridotta" constructed on the hill by Italian soldiers, and this ruin soon came to be considered as a "Basilica bizantina." Professor Silvio Ferri, visiting Ajdabiyah in 1924 to copy the Roman inscriptions near the wells (11) photographed the "basilica" and pointed out its Islamic character; but the incorrect designa-

(5) For the general history of Ajdabiyah, up to 1922, see E. De Agostini, *Le popolazioni della Cirenaica*, (Benغازي 1922-23), 442-443.

(6) *Relations inédites de la Cyrenaïque* (Soc. Geogr. Rec. des Voyages. II, 20-28). The Mosque will be described in a subsequent article by the present writer.

(7) J.-R. Pacho, *Relation d'un voyage dans la Marmarique, etc.* (Paris 1827-29) pp. 268-269, PL. XC. (Pl. I, a)

(8) James, Hamilton, *Wanderings in North Africa*, (London 1856), 173-175.

(9) G. Rohlfs, *Von Tripolis nach Alexandrien* (Bremer 1871), II, 38-39.

(10) G. A. Freund, in Vigoni, *Pionieri Italiani in Libia* (Milan 1912), pp. 164-165.

(11) Ferri, loc. cit.

tion continued in use even in scientific publications (12). Fragments of Islamic-period reliefs, photographed at Ajdabiyah about 1925 and since lost, may have come from the Fortress-Palace itself Pl. (LVII *b*), but their precise provenance is not recorded.

During the war-years 1940-43 the fence protecting the vaulted chamber was removed, and further neglect set in, resulting in the collapse of the vault (already much eroded by the continuous wind of the Syrtic region) in 1947. In 1952 the Department of Antiquities decided to excavate the monument so as to determine its true character, and to decide on the best policy of conservation (13). The work was carried out in February to April of that year under the direction of Mr Naim Makhouly, and laid bare the whole extent of the Fortress. Further clearances, including the removal of intrusive 'squatters' walls, were made by the present writer in 1962, the high-standing walls of the vaulted chamber being consolidated.

External characteristics. (Pl. LVII, *a*, and LX)

The Fortress is rectangular, its curtain walls (exclusive of the projecting towers) measuring 33.5×25.5 metres. The longer axis is from north to south (14), and on it lie the projecting gateway-tower on the north, and the smaller projecting tower formed by the end of the vaulted chamber. Similar rectangular towers also occupy the centres of the east and west walls.

The corner towers are circular, and Pacho's drawing of 1824 shows that they were roofed with domes rising to approximately the same height as that of the vaults over the three chambers. These domes were apparently internal, and the outer faces of the towers continued upwards to the parapets, for the height of which there is no evidence. The well-preserved facade of the south Fortress wall, as drawn by Pacho, shows no trace of ornamentation; and from the fact that Hamilton also commented on the absence of inscriptions or other decorative elements, we may conclude that the outer appearance of the Fortress was austere. One fragment of Kufic inscription and some decorated blocks have since been found in the course of excavation (Pl. LIX, *b-d*) and it is possible that the entrance-tower was more ornate than the others.

The masonry employed throughout the Fortress consists of well-cut rectangular blocks of the local limestone, a rather friable stone with a high fossil content. Lime mortar is used extensively, although the joints between blocks have often been scoured of mortar by the action of the wind.

The Gateway and Vestibule. (Pl. LIX, *a*)

The gateway-tower projects 4.20 metres from the north wall of the Fortress, and is larger than the other towers. The outer door itself appears to have been 2 m. broad, although its jambs have crumbled. A passage (1) 2.7 metres broad and 3.80 metres long leads to the inner doorway which was blocked at a very late period, probably after the decline of the city. On each side of this passageway is a low bench, backed by three semicircular niches, of which the central one is the largest (1.30 metres in diameter, as contrasted with 0.50 metres for

(12) Cf. P. Romanelli, *La Cirenaica Romana* (Verbania 1943), 174, 243 and fig. 31.

(13) The programme was initiated by Mr. C. N. Johns, then Controller of Antiquities in Cyrenaica.

(14) The entrance tower faces the north-east, but for purposes of simplicity, in the following pages the fort is described as though it were accurately oriented, with the entrance on the north.

the smaller niches). These gateway niches are characteristic of early Islamic fortress tecture (15).

The gateway passage leads into a vestibule (2) measuring 8.20×4.60 metres, which nally had a broad doorway leading into the central courtyard; but this was blocked in a second period of the Fortress' life, so that the courtyard became accessible only from the flanking gallery with which the vestibule communicated by a doorway in its east wall, and probably by an on the west, although the latter was removed in subsequent modifications.

The Galleries and the courtyard.

The inner courtyard (3) of the Fortress is a simple rectangle of 19×14.5 metres, with a well in its north-eastern part. This well, one half metre in diameter, has an uppermost wall head of monolithic construction, the high level of which indicates the raising of the courtyard level by some 0.80 metres.

The galleries themselves, which flank the courtyard on east (4) and west (5), show signs of several modifications, but there is reason to believe that they were originally continuous and only later divided into compartments of irregular sizes. Stone-robbing has, however, greatly mutilated them. The western gallery contains, cut into the thickness of the Fortress wall close to the western tower, a flight of steps (6) leading to the upper range of rooms and thence to the parapet. Other staircases must have existed in the building, but their sites are not apparent except, possibly, in the room immediately west of the vestibule.

The Vaulted rooms. (Pl. LVIII, a and b)

Whereas the vestibule and galleries probably had flat ceilings forming the floors of the upper storey rooms, the three chambers at the south end of the courtyard were vaulted and lofty. They were separated from the galleries by a continuous wall, and from the courtyard by a second vestibule (7) pierced by three doorways. Of this second vestibule and the two flanking chambers little has survived except for the lowest courses of their walls; but the central vaulted chamber (9) still remains—as at the time of Pacho's visit—the dominant feature of the whole internal layout. Apart from the collapse of its much-weathered barrel-vault, its condition has changed little since it was first photographed some thirty years ago.

Whereas the two side chambers (8 and 10) had simple doorways opening from the vestibule, the central chamber is completely open on this side. Its entrance is flanked by two engaged columns with simple undecorated capitals, the latter being the only part of the column that was cut separately rather than carved out of a standing mass of masonry. Two similar columns, but with their bases at a slightly higher level, flank the entrance to the innermost room (which is, in fact, the interior of the projecting south tower). Two round-headed squinches, decorated with carved and plastered conches, convert the rectangular plan of the tower to a half-octagon, from which springs the half-dome in which the vaulted hall terminates.

The front pair of columns, adjoining the vestibule, support large impost-blocks from which sprang not only the main arch marking the end of the barrel-vault, but also lateral arches spanning the vestibule itself. The beginning of the spring of the westernmost of these latter arches

(15) Cf. similar niches at Khirbet el-Mefjer, (*Quart. Dep. Ant. Pal.*, X [1944], 153) apparently of Umayyad date.

is still visible; but it is not clear whether these were free-standing arches or helped to support another barrel-vault running east and west along the whole length of the vestibule.

The date and function of the Fortress.

There is no direct evidence for the date of the Fortress, but its masonry techniques are similar to those employed in the nearby Mosque built between A.D. 934 and 946 by the Fatimid Khalif Abu el-Kasem. The one fragment of Kufic inscription (Pl. LIX, *d*) found in the Fortress resembles other of this same period found in Cyrenaica, at Ajdabiyah and El-Merj. These facts, and general historical probability, incline one to assign a Fatimid date to the building.

There are no signs of any earlier, Roman-period, building on the site of the Fortress; nor are there any indications in the descriptions left by 19th century travellers to suggest that other Islamic structures stood close to it. It appears, therefore, to have been an isolated structure built on this hill-top in Fatimid times, when Ajdabiyah was enjoying its period of maximum prosperity. If we assume that the Mosque of Abu el-Kasem stood within the walled city (the approximate site of which is probably marked by the Moslem cemetery), then this Fortress was certainly extra-mural, and some 500 metres distant from the city proper.

Although essentially defensive, our Fortress is also 'palatial' in the sense that the three large vaulted chambers, and their connected vestibule, dominate the plan. The central chamber can hardly be other than a "hall of audience" of the type commonly found in Islamic palaces, and to which Cresswell gives the name *liwan*, and the flanking rooms and vestibule belong to this same group of public chambers occupying a relatively large part of the interior of the fortress.

It is clear, therefore, that the fortress was not a *ribat* or frontier-barracks garrisoned with volunteers. The well-known example of such a *ribat* (at Susa, in Tunisia) lacks any such public chambers, being divided internally into small cell-like rooms of equal size. Nor, on the other hand, does the character and position of the Ajdabiyah building seem to justify our calling it a "khan" or caravanserail for travellers. (16) With the walled town of Ajdabiyah not far distant, there would be little need of such a caravanserail on this site; and the public business of the audience-hall could hardly be performed amidst the bustle of arriving and departing caravans.

It seems far more likely that the fortress was constructed to serve as the residence (permanent or occasional) of the Arab governor of these Syrtic regions, who would have preferred to sojourn outside the walls of Ajdabiyah, surrounded only by his personal escort and followers. Similar buildings in Palestine have sometimes been identified as "hunting-lodges," but whilst this interpretation might apply to a fortress-palace situated in a place remote from inhabited centres, it is hardly applicable in the immediate neighbourhood of a busy commercial centre such as Fatimid Ajdabiyah must have been.

Whether or not these conclusions are valid, the fortress-palace of Ajdabiyah is the only Islamic building of its type known to exist within the whole vast area of modern Libya; and it is to be hoped that its previous and inaccurate description as a "Byzantine Basilica" may be deleted from any future works of reference.

(16) In dimensions, our fortress is closely akin to the «khan» of Atshan (K. A. C. Cresswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 198 and fig. 38).